Blessed

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Psalm 111
Matthew 5:1-12

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."
Matthew 5:3

Silence in us any voice but your own, O God, and startle us again with your truth and grace and love: in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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Preachers are on the look out for material–everywhere and all the time: in books, newspapers, movies, theater, sometimes sporting events. Across the land today, many of us will find the afternoon's activities in New Orleans irresistible, and somehow we will find a way to use the Super Bowl for illustrative purposes. Just when I had about given up on a Super Bowl connection, our organist, John Sherer, put on my desk an "Order of Service for Super Bowl Sunday for the Episcopal Church." It includes the following instructions:

> Prior to the entrance hymn, the pastors will toss a coin. The winner may elect to be the preacher or celebrant; the loser may elect to defend the pulpit or the lectern.
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> Any acolyte found to be in illegal motion will be assessed a five-yard penalty or the loss of one candle.
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> The celebrant may fake a hand-off to the lay reader and read the lessons himself, provided changes in audible signals are given.
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> A sermon in excess of fifteen minutes will be regarded as "Delay of Service."
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> The two-minute warning will be played by the chimes.

We take our ideas where we find them, and one consistent place is the cover articles in national magazines. A particularly fertile source are those

stacks of magazines one encounters in the doctor's office or the barbershop. And so it was that my eye fell on the January issue of *Esquire,* which caught me with the bold topic "The Meaning of Life." What preacher could possibly resist that? The feature article was titled "What I've Learned, 1000 Years Worth of Wisdom and Wild Foolishness from 17 Extraordinary Lives." There were 56 pages of wisdom from highly successful and famous Americans. I thought to myself, "There has to be a sermon in there somewhere." A few choice bits of advice:

> Chuck Berry (blues musician): "Of the five most important things in life, health is first, education or knowledge is second, wealth is third, I forget the other two."
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> Loretta Lynn: "Cheatin', love, and the Bible–that's what we sing about. The rest of it are just fantasy songs and they ain't gonna make it."
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> Yogi Berra: "Ask questions. It might lead to something."
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> Homer Simpson: "My favorite color is chocolate."
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> George Steinbrenner, for the purposes of this sermon, perhaps got off the best one: "Second place is really first place loser."

The truth is there wasn't a sermon in there. On the other hand, there is a sermon in what was not there and certainly in the topic itself, the meaning of life, the relentless human quest for it, or for something very much like it: fullness of life, happiness, wholeness, contentment, fulfillment, which our culture, so eloquently expressed by *Esquire,* relentlessly defines as being successful, wealthy, famous–a winner.

My colleague, Carol Allen, loaned me a book of essays she had found recently by one of my favorite authors, Wendell Berry. The title of the book is *What Are People For?* In an essay of that title, Berry, who is a Kentucky farmer, describes the demise of the small farm and the exodus of rural farmers to the cities because they can no longer make it. Berry muses about the conclusion of agricultural economists that there are "too many farmers," but when the cities fill up with more people than there are jobs, the same economists conclude that we have on our hands the "permanently unemployable." "Maybe we have too many agricultural economists," he speculates and then reflects, "Is the greatest dignity in unemployment? Is the obsolescence of human beings now our social goal? . . . The great question that hovers over this issue, one that has been dealt with mainly by indifference, is the question of what people are for" (p. 125).

It is the purpose of religion to help us figure out the answer to that question. It is the purpose of religion to help us understand and affirm and then live out the meaning of our lives. And so, one day, at the beginning of his relationship with his followers, men and women who had walked away from what they were doing–which is to say walked away from the old meaning and purpose of their lives as fishermen, tax collectors, tent makers, tradespeople–to follow him, one day he took them away from the crowds that were attracted everywhere they went and sat down in the middle of them, sat down as a rabbi always sits in the midst of his students, and the clear purpose of the exercise was to teach them–something about the meaning of their lives, what they were for. And he said:

> Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
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> Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
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> "Blessed are the meek . . . and those who hunger and thirst, and the merciful, and the pure in heart, and the peacemakers, and the persecuted . . .

I've always had trouble with that word *blessed.* It always seems a little soft and pious: "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine"; "Blessed be the tie that binds." Someone recently called blessed a "bland and mushy word" (Lillian Daniels, *Christian Century,* 16 January 2002).

So I was delighted to discover that the word translated "blessed" really means "happy." We're not talking only about a state of blessedness, which sounds frankly a little saintly, but a state of happiness, a contentment with who one is and what one is doing, a profound sense of wholeness and purpose and meaning, if you will. Who wouldn't give anything for that?

Experts have always puzzled over these sayings of Jesus, which are known as "The Beatitudes." They remain a bit of a mystery. They are more poetry than moral instruction. They remind me of the question a reporter once asked a famous Russian ballerina after a particularly superb performance: "What did you mean by that dance?" he asked. She responded, "If I could explain it, I would not have had to dance." The Beatitudes are clearly not moral imperatives. Jesus did not say, "Become poor in spirit and you will receive the kingdom of heaven." They are declarative sentences, descriptions: "Happy are the poor in spirit, the meek." And yet you can't get away from the moral and behavioral and social implications.

What they are, I think, are a radically new definition of the purpose and meaning of human life and, beyond that, a radical new definition of God's gift of meaning and purpose and happiness. Happiness, blessedness, Jesus

said, is something you are given–particularly as you find yourself poor in spirit or mourning or hungry for righteousness or merciful or persecuted. Blessedness or happiness is something you are given apparently when you stop striving for it, trying to earn it or accomplish it, and give yourself to something else–to God's concerns for human life, God's agenda, which Jesus calls the "Kingdom of God"; to caring for and loving others, becoming poor in spirit, sharing the burden of others, particularly their mourning. Happiness is your gift from God when you show mercy, not judgment, for instance in your approach to the moral dilemmas of life; when you give yourself to the pursuit of truth and justice, above all. You receive the gift of wholeness, happiness, blessedness, when you care about something so deeply you risk persecution, the disapproval of your friends, the criticism of your peers.

It is a new definition of what human life is about, and it is radically different from what the world offers. You are not defined by how much money you earn, how much you have accumulated, how much power and influence you wield. The meaning and purpose of your life is not defined by how beautiful or handsome you are or how successful you have become.

Instead, you are blessed–which means deeply happy–when you love enough to become poor in spirit and meek and hungry, when you love enough to experience pain and grief, when you are willing to lay your life on the line for God and God's kingdom, God's program, on earth.

I traveled to Alaska last Sunday to give a speech in Sitka, at a small Presbyterian college, Sheldon Jackson.

Sheldon Jackson College has been in Sitka for most of this century, serving a largely native Alaskan student body, which comes from the widely dispersed native villages of the Inner Passageways on the western coast, most of them accessible only by boat or float plane.

Sheldon Jackson is–and always has been–a challenge to maintain, and one of the ways it stays in business is by volunteers: Volunteers in Mission we call them: Presbyterians who give six months to a year as a volunteer and get in return room and board and a lot of work. Most, but not all, are retirees.

At Sheldon Jackson, I met Joan Corliss, a retired professor of education at the University of Dayton, who lost her husband and in her grief decided to teach native Alaskans who want to be schoolteachers.

I met Duna Williamson, a retired IBM executive, single, who decided to begin the retirement chapter of her life teaching math and taking her meals in a college cafeteria in Sitka, Alaska.

I met a retired couple, both professionals, attractive, obviously successful, from Idaho, who worked in a hostel Sheldon Jackson sponsors for relatives of native patients who come to the regional hospital in Sitka. She does the administration, the room assignments. He is the chief maintenance man: shovels snow, replaces windows, cleans the bathrooms.

The dozen or so Volunteers in Mission invited me to lunch, eager to hear how things were going in the PCUSA, but I could hardly get a word in: they were so exuberant, so eager to tell me about what they were doing, and their adventures. Duna, for instance, spent Thanksgiving at the northernmost Presbyterian church in the world, in Barrow, which on Thanksgiving uses its sanctuary for the annual distribution of whale meat. The feast begins right there, but not with turkey and cranberry sauce but slightly fermented whale blubber. "Did you eat it, Duna?" I asked the former IBM executive. "You bet I did," she said. "It was terrible." They laughed and laughed and I thought, "These people are happy. They are so happy, they are blessed."

In Walker Percy's novel *The Second Coming*, the author asks, "Is it possible for people to miss their lives in the same way one misses a plane" and then he describes a man: "Not once in his entire life has he allowed himself to come to rest in the quiet center of himself but forever cast himself forward from some dark past he could not remember to a future that did not exist, not once had he been present for his life. So his life had passed as a dream" (See Eugene Peterson's *Reversed Thunder*, p. 192).

So the question comes to each one of us: What are you for? What is your purpose? What is your meaning?

And the invitation is to take a long look at how you are defining your life–to maybe let go of the frantic striving and to follow him, where you are, the One who promises blessedness, blessed wholeness and happiness in his service: Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen.